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Poems

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Lazarus

Not that I was unhappy to be woken,
But resting in the hollow of the cave's hand
I no longer had to hold myself together.
My body was secured, wrapped in a winding sheet.
I slept undisturbed, bound by cloth,
My jaw strapped shut. No day
Could force itself between where I lay
And the rock that closed me in.

But no family is easily forgotten.
My sisters' tears were hard to bear,
Salt that cured a dissipation the memory
Of funeral candles may have wrought.
I would remember smoke fading into air
And want to end that way. But the cave
Would not welcome me into its darkest parts.
Those places were reserved for those that mourned.
So I grew weary of my sepulchre
And was glad to waken then and be untied.

I heard Jesus wept when he came to Bethany
And saw Mary's grief. But I believe he also cried
For each solitude that is crushed by the stone
That every resurrection must roll back.

Judas' Conversation

Peter, I've had enough. It can't go on
Like this much longer. That last night did it.
Look, I heard about the rooster and three crows.
I know our crimes were not the same, I should
Feel worse than you for what I did, but still,
You were sorry and forgave yourself.

The thing is, it's more than my betrayal
That has got me down: it's the water
And the spirit stuff he talked about:
I was never born again. I'd hoped
He'd make me good, but it didn't work.
Don't play dumb or play it down. You were there
For the duration, me always poking
In the money-bag. Selling him to priests
Was just the last and worst of what I'd done.

This sort of thing is not as bad for you
Because you let things go. You always could.
From the first. You are one of those who can
Drop the old life for the new, leave fish and nets
Dragged on the beach and hang the taxman.
I also regret, but mistakes stay with me.
They accumulate. I drag them along
Until I can't go on. You cut them loose.
My idea of cutting loose is a shirt untucked,
The sleeves of a formal shirt rolled up.

He said don't put fresh wine in old wineskins,

But I look back, the tap on my shoulder.

It's been this way as long as I remember.

It gets tiresome always feeling bad.

I take your point, it's the trying to be good,

Not the feeling that you are that counts.

But I can't change. Now I'm close to bursting.

But don't you go getting down now too

On my account, I'm sure I'll be all right.

I've plans for hanging on in my own way.

The Baptism of Angus

Knowing of the crucifixion, I said
Nothing when Patrick put his hand
In blessing on my head, and I felt
His crozier pushing through my foot.

Patrick was shocked by the stigmata
He had made, but I already knew
The iron point of my salvation:
A death precedes each resurrection.
Half-dead to myself for years by then,
The pain of Patrick's misplaced crook was small
Compared to the promise that he preached.
So my body was my article of faith:
I would not let this communion pass,
Reveal me as no more than a host
My tongue dissolved, washed down with wine.

I did not flinch when Patrick pierced my foot,
But I heard another sound, a Banshee's scream
Calling one last soul to share her death.
But for me, it was a spearing of past gods
By the sword of tribal chiefs. Ireland
Will follow the conversions of her kings.
Kneeling there on Cashel Rock, site of my throne,
I could see the plains of Tipperary
Spreading behind Patrick's back like vestments.

Until The Last Man

In Stalingrad we no longer see things
In the old ways. We have heard our leaders,
Those small men, say that our nation lives
Beyond the death of single persons.
But there is no national ardour here,
No Sixth Army marching through the Arc de Triomphe.

For months we have stared between the arches
Of bombed buildings and watched a world turn on itself,
The days made dark by smoke and nights lit up by fire.
The hardest stones cannot bear this place for long.
But men endure, making homes in rubble
And eating horse-flesh raw. We are worse than beasts.
Even the city's strays knew from the start
This was no place for dogs. After dusk
They would try to reach the Volga's further bank.

Now in winter, snow lies like a cadaver
Across Stalingrad, marking it as our mass grave.
A litter of frozen comrades is our cairn.
The nation that once lived in us lies still.
We who remain would not betray ourselves
As men. We stand up, arms raised in surrender,
And see a corpse, a twisted figure on the floor.
He is a swastika spread-eagled in the rubble.
Shuffling past nationhood and fallen flags
The historic duty we fulfil is to survive.

Icarus

My father held his freedom in his hands.
The memory of my mother was the wine
He drank from the flagon of each feather
He cupped in his palms. In each gull's wing
He saw his way of returning to a wife
Who was becoming old and white without him.

For a time this island's rocks meant more to me
Than cairns that mourned my parents' marriage.
I was captive to a woman whose hair
Would fall around my face like mooring ropes.
But later even the grass in which we hid
Before she left, when I walked through it,
Swayed like the wings of an albatross
Launching into a solitude of air.

I followed my father in his flight.
Once I thought I saw a woman's figure
On the island way below us, staring up.
A farmer had put a scarecrow in his field
To frighten birds. I flew further
From the woman who had left me.
I could feel the feathers falling from my wings.

Alexander and Bucephalus

They thought because he wouldn't bear their weight
The horse would lift no man above the ground.
When they couldn't match his strength, they didn't see
It wasn't their reins the beast resisted.
The horse was scared by his own shadow.

After the failure of my father's men,
I took the stallion's bridle in my hand
And turned him to the sun. His shadow
Fell behind, to be forgotten for a time.
He let me mount him then. I understood,
Being one who felt darker motives
Move beneath the feet of all my deeds.

Taming the black horse, I had a vision
Of the shadows that would come with the dreams
Of empire my father schooled me in:
Defeated Batis dragged around the walls
Of ruined Gaza, trailing my chariot;
Too much to drink; old friend Cleitus
Lying in wine and blood, run through with my lance ...

My father wept when he saw what I had done
With Bucephalus. I was proud too,
But, bringing the horse to order, I knew
The shadows are never wholly tamed.
They will always follow where we lead.

When A Zulu Dies Away From Home

Who would believe the sky could bear so much,
The water washing shacks and you away?
We heard from other boys you tried to cross
One stream too many, that linked arms wouldn't hold.
Some fights you don't take on. We searched for days,
But found only animals, corpses of trees.
The police and divers have lost hope.

We've cut down a thorn tree's twisted limbs.
Now we'll walk to where your hands last failed,
To dry the bank with leaves. Try to catch
The branches if you can. We won't talk,
So you don't see your parents saddened
And think by hiding you can spare us.
Nothing will be said to shame your spirit
Into slipping past a second time.

The branches will be buried where you lived.
Don't concern yourself about the thorns
That grow in pairs. Grant us the scratches
Of the short barbs pointing back towards what's past,
And straight thorns growing through our hearts. Rest now,
But let us know in dreams that you've come home.

A Tibetan Father's Burial

Your body held no meaning for us
Once you had abandoned it. The porter
Carried what remained into the hills.
We followed him onto the barren ground.
It didn't look like you. With little soil
To cover corpses here, and wood too scarce
To burn what had no place among us then,
We felt it better that the raptors took it.

The mourners made it easy for them,
Stripped old limbs and smashed the final bones.
Some say that once they've fed, the vultures
Help your spirit soar. But I'm not convinced
That beaks on long unfeathered necks escaped
With all your soul. Some nights I've seen you
Standing in my room. I sleep more easily.
And the birds still circle hungry overhead.

Housework

This house has brought you to your knees.
Balls of fluff fall from the furniture
And huddle with the dust in hidden places
Where the gathered dirt whispers its rebellion.

You hear this voice and it reminds you
Of your marriage like a broken vacuum.
Each time you fix its bandaged hose you cut
A little off. This machine is not a love
Large enough to swallow all the pieces
From the floor. The dust returns to test
How many times you can begin again.

It has got you crawling, but you keep on
Polishing the promises you made
Years ago to your man. Now, rolling back
The carpet you've cleaned under many times before,
Nothing is revealed that you don't already know:
Ones like you will keep on bending
While falling carpets crush your shaken air.

Beside The Sea

We sit with drinks and dusk beside the sea,
Arms rested on a table wet with beer.
Our elbows stay stuck to the wood. We are
Unwilling to let go. For now, anchored
By each other's presence.

The harbour water,
Washing by, dredges up our knowledge
That you are soon to leave, on a boat,
Bound for another country. We sit,
Waiting for the tides that will carry you
From these last shafts of sun, these intimacies ...

Beside the harbour wall, I look toward
Ships that sailors use to harvest livings
From the sea, drawing hope up from below
The broken waves. Between the boats a bird
Watches for what swims beneath the water.

As it moves, the cormorant splices
The surface, its body half submerged, neither
Wholly in the water or above it.
Then it disappears after a fish.
I want to follow that bird down and search
For you in water that, as it settles,
Is still ringed by the ripples of your absence.

In the Dark

Nothing in this weather seems to change,
The same rain's been falling now for days.
Standing in the balcony's cold light,
I know again that I am always waiting
For you to walk down this road below the flat.
But no promise of a revelation comes.
Our absences extend into the dark,
On nights like these, and are made larger
Once dispersed:

Further up two people pass
On the main road, sounds of their talking
Reaching here, but the words are indistinct.
Later, in the park across the way, a man
Sits on a swing and rocks over this night's
Muddied middle ground. He chews a finger-end,
As if within himself he hopes to find
The marrow of an explanation. It is
Beyond him. Rain blows onto the balcony.
Behind the swing, creepers cling to a brick wall.

The Pianist

Your kneading hands acknowledged an older master's
Feeling for the keen sounds of solitude,
A quaver of notes pressed down against worn keys.
Now another lover's left you, a cleft note sounded

Then stored in the memory of your piano's strings.
There, in the resonating hollows of your craft,
Wires take up the necessary strain of music
Traced from the veins of each musician's hands.

Gulls

The gulls hang on the breeze, white crosses pinned
Against a cloudless sky. These birds hope to find
Food amongst the litter people leave on land.

They also search through the shards waves trail
Behind them in their wakes. The gulls fill
Each other's hunger with a constant crying.

Like gulls, we are scratching
For the bones of anything we still might share.
We find them scattered on a shore that divides

Your presence here from your departure.
The absences this day foresees are filled
With our mewing for last scavenged minutes.

With a Friend at the Whale Festival

To make the perfect breakfast was enough,
As if olive-bread, tomato, cottage cheese
Could shape a morning into sandwiches
And fill us. What was outside would wait.
Rain rolling down the windscreen, windows shut,
Our world seemed no larger than your car.

Later, watching from the rocks above the sea,
You could lean into my arms against the cold
And feel certain lust had been displaced
By something more dependable. Out in front
Of us a cow moved slowly with her calf,
Water clearing off their backs as each swell passed.
The waves disclosed no more than dark grey slabs,
But these were the backbones of the whales,
Suggestions of the muscle underneath.

When rain drove us inside the restaurant,
We had no need to talk or fear the silence
Would expose an awkward feeling left unsaid.
Both reading then, the only sounds were sips
Of coffee being drunk, the next page turned.
But something we'd sensed earlier was present,
Drifting past our table, unconcerned by swells.

The Fishermen

The catch is iced, the boat is on its trailer,
The nets packed, and up the road behind the dunes
A car with headlights on, the men's lift home,
Makes its way toward the beach. The waves
Break and stagger to the sand.

Each night

Around this time, the man who served in boats
Imagines scenes like this that carry on
Without him. He pictures men worn down by work,
But knows the crews are not exhausted
In the manner he is now. Bedridden,
Caught in the drag-net of his age, the old man
Feels a pain that's more than one man bears.

His days of fishing over, he dwells
On what is left him. He has seen the gulls
Pick clean bones of fish abandoned by the boat.
The old man can conceive a future heaven
Only in things he's known: on the boat,
The ocean calm; or with his wife and children.

But night is more lonely than the day for him.
The old man anticipates he will sleep
Fitfully, frightened that he may not wake
Or, if he does, no-one will hear his moans.
Morning allays these fears. When his wife moves

About the house, and thoughts of men at work
On boats recur, he feels old securities
Of work done well until the muscles fail.

The old man recalls the fishermen once more:
By now they've hitched the trailer to the car,
Climbed in and driven off. He must believe
They will return, can brace themselves, sliding down
The backs of waves, and still land fish. Beyond faith,
It is his final hope: that men resist
Their struggle that ends breathless on the shore.

Miscarriage

Something inside of me curled up that night,
The baby dead before it had been born.

Back from the hospital with a cold child
Into the late dusk, dark with running clouds.

Neither day nor night, what remained of me
Contracted into a foetus' fist,

Cold and clean like broken glass, or Venus,
Evening's first star, hidden behind clouds

And reappearing in the last pale sky.
It was a fist clenched tight and flung against

My ribs. There is no wind can shake this thing
I carry still, now grown hard as crystal.

Its filaments stroke and erode, a chisel,
So that I am getting smaller always.

Onions

The slow boil in the kitchen once again.
Onion skin tears easily between my fingers.
It is as if I watch my body flake
Beneath the cuts I make. I have come apart.
Something in me has broken.

My husband in the living-room did not do this.
His arm on my side at night holds me together.
The onion's scent does not breach the shelter
Of the hearts we've built and filled with children
Who make noise into these times when I lie
On the cutting board. But something in me
Was always broken, and will not be repaired now.
The incisions of this solitude.

Early Harvest

The saplings are still small enough
That if you pass by quickly
It seems the field lies fallow
With a stand of purple weeds.

Slow wings beat above the young fir rows.
Even so, the kite moves swiftly,
While its black eyes track the furrowed lanes.
At field's edge it banks, drops to the ground,

Then rises with some scavenged item
In its claws: a mouse or vole:
The field offers its first harvest,
Large enough to fill the crop.

The Falcon

Grey clouds give their colour, overcast,
To what is set against them.

Ordinary for this season,
Dark-bodied doves drift slowly
In the sullen weather. Day sleeps,
As though refusing to admit
Its aimlessness.

Until, above,
A new shape's freed from lethargy.
Much larger, pointed wings drawn back,
Its floating turns and shallow dives
Are more than silhouettes of purpose.
But this raptor is not hunting.
Steep-angled stoops or rapid chase
Won't claw the haunted doves. The falcon
Feeds on skill it's known since fledging:

Not earth-bound, or shadowed as we are
By the gravity of days,
It glides, lifts itself, and does not kill
What grew with its first primaries,
When it sensed that feathers' hollow bones
Contain the air of their first flight.

In Harbour

Sometimes, when the harbour water is hull-grey
As sunken ships, and kelp below the rocks
Sways like rusted metal sheets, the promise
The ocean often makes you feels betrayed:
The one made across the bay by breakers,
When it seems as if each gathered wave
Shoulders a load it struggles with until,
Collapsing to its close, the weight is dropped,
Its fragments lying sifted in the sand.

Instead the harbour water, grown dull,
Reminds you of the wreck that won't be crushed,
The absence of the woman who was once
An undoubted shelter for your heart.
Here swells roll against the quays' stone walls
And fall back on themselves. This is not
A solitude that will be run to ground.
Caught in the restless movement of these tides,
You're still on your knees between the boats.

Confession

It is the simple pleasures that are best.
A cigarette after hours without one,
Drawing on it, sitting in the cool hallway.
The smoke spreads around inside your head,
Leaving you a little drunk. And a cup
Of tea, brown-sugared - a softer sweetness
Than the white. These things are not complex.

These things are not illicit pleasures,
Like a young Augustine stealing apples
From another's orchard. Nor are they stolen
In another way, like that time my lips
Met hers when I knew my heart was elsewhere.

I do not want to have to make confessions,
To be afraid that what you want in me
You found there when I was less than honest.
But I am being honest with this now:
The simple things are best because they're pure.
I enjoyed that tea and cigarette,
And I would want to love you the same way.
Being with you: the softer sweetness
Of brown sugar, maybe a little drunk.

Travelling

The farmland's

Memory

Of her lovers

Had been braided

Into the plaits

Of her blonde leaves.

The square vineyards

Were our reminder

Of each man

That had ploughed

Her under

And picked

The bunched grapes

Of her heart.

But as we drove

A mist curtain

Was drawn back

And we saw

The farmland

Shaking loose

Her rain-soaked hair.

Beside me

In the car,

You leaned across

And laid your hand

Upon my knee.

It settled

Like snow

On the dark slopes

Above the farms.

Appendix

'The Star-Splitter': Robert Frost and the Performance of Poetry

His appearance is a regular occurrence now. Daily, mid-morning, around ten o'clock. It is usually the sound that alerts you to him first. The same six syllable rising and descending call, repeated until it seems the whole sky echoes with it, coming through the window. Walking out onto the veranda you can see the crowned eagle soar above you, fifty metres clear of the tallest trees, the massive, broad wings held wide as he climbs and dives in shallow pitches. The display is pure performance - a sustained exhibition of sound and movement generated freely within the confines of aerodynamic law. I have experienced this same sense of rhythm that could redeem any day, that you grow to expect will redeem your day, in two other places - playing touch rugby, and writing and reading poetry, particularly that of Robert Frost. The comparisons may seem banal, but they are not coincidental. Frost once said, in a Princeton University address, 'You must have form - performance. The thing itself is indescribable, but it is felt like athletic form. To have form, feel form in sports - and by analogy feel form in verse. One works and waits for form in both.' We say that a sportsman who is playing at the top of his game is 'in form', and that a poem 'runs' in a way we enjoy. What both have in common is that feeling Frost describes, when 'like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem (rides) on its own melting.' Poetry is not pure rhythm only though, although it begins there, but an impulse to language and meaning. When it works, the poem is the point where an impulse to movement and language takes shape.

'The Star-Splitter' is not one of Frost's better poems, yet that title, 'The Star-Splitter', embodies for me many of the qualities of

performance one would wish from any poem. It is what Seamus Heaney would call a 'language event': 'Star-Splitter', the word rolls on the tongue and off it. It is evenly pitched, the long 'a' vowel sound in 'Star' balanced by the sharp axe-blow of the 'pl' in 'Splitter'. The repetition of the 't's' and 'r's' in each word-half ensures that the word coheres in the ear, as it is simultaneously broken apart to the eye by the hyphen, and in our understanding by the meaning of 'to split'. For now though, any thoughts we have about the title's meaning are intuitive. Like the girl's name in Frost's poem 'Maple', 'Its strangeness lay/ In having too much meaning.' Even before we encounter the poem proper and its themes, and are given the writer's meaning for it, the title holds us with all the first promise of poetry. That it could achieve something remarkable; something, in language, as impossible as the splitting of a star. That it will perform. That it will be, in one of Frost's definitions of poetry, one of those 'words that have become deeds.' It is with this belief, or hope, that poets approach poetry.

That telescope was christened the Star-splitter,
 Because it didn't do a thing but split
 A star in two or three the way you split
 A globule of quicksilver in your hand
 With one stroke of your finger in the middle.

The telescope becomes for me a symbol, in particular, of poetic performance: the efforts of poetry to bring language into focus, split so that every detail of meaning is suggested, but running in the smooth, uninterrupted flow of a form guided by the poet's hand. There is also a quality of elusiveness which applies to a meaning that is evident in the language and structure of the poem without being expressly stated.

In 'The Star-Splitter', the speaker relates the story of Brad McLaughlin, an unsuccessful farmer, who burns his house down in order to claim the fire insurance and buy himself a telescope. His transgression is forgiven, he takes up a new job that affords him the time to pursue his interest in astronomy, and the speaker continues with an account of an evening spent star-gazing with Brad. If we read the description of the naming of the telescope as one prescription for what is required of good poetry, Brad's actions may be seen as further representative of the 'performance' required of each poem. But performance that is more significant than merely working well. Or as Frost writes in an essay, 'The Constant Symbol',

Every single poem written regular [sic] is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost ...

'The Star-Splitter' contains elements of Frost's two distinctive modes, the longer narrative, and the shorter, concentrated pieces. I will use this poem as an introduction to 'Mending Wall', 'Death of the Hired Man', and 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. These three poems, which have had the most influence on me of any of Frost's works, will serve as points of departure for my discussion of how poetry 'performs'. My own poetry shares a concern for 'form' with Frost's work; and this particular interest, and the other ways in which his poetry may be said to perform, is related to the considerations I bring to my writing. I feel that by examining Frost's works, I will reflect also on a number of important aspects of my own.

'The Star-Splitter' begins

'You know Orion always comes up sideways.
 Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains,
 And rising on his hands, he looks in on me

Despite Brad McLaughlin's good-natured, 'reckless talk', there is something vaguely unwelcome about Orion's intrusion. A reader of Frost is reminded here of his earlier phrase from 'Mending Wall', 'Good fences make good neighbors.' 'Mending Wall' is a dramatic monologue recounted by a farmer who, finding the boundary wall of his farm damaged, alerts the neighbour who shares the wall with him to this, and the two of them set about repairing it. In his account of the work they do, the speaker wonders about the necessity of walls, and condemns his neighbour's unquestioning response that 'good fences make good neighbours.' For me, 'Mending Wall' is an always welcome guest. It has an absolutely hypnotic quality. I read it over and over, and still it has the same effect.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
 And spills the upper boulders in the sun ...

The lines pull you forward and onward. There is a compelling insistence to them. Any number of critics will tell you this is the result of Frost's natural, speaking voice. Up to a point they are correct of course. Describing the creation of this voice in a letter to John Bartlett, dated 4 July, 1913, Frost refers to the 'sound of sense', which is what he calls 'the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound - pure form.' He continues, 'if one is to be a poet he [sic] must

learn to get cadences by skilfully breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre.' Certainly, reading 'Mending Wall' one is aware of the vitality of that sound, the pure form and performance of the piece. The poem is utterly beguiling. We are charmed by it, despite its less than charming undercurrents. I believe this effect is achieved because of the way in which the words mislead us. What the words appear to say diverts our attention from the heart of the poem. 'Mending Wall' begins with a line that, although it ends in a comma, a pause only, has the assurance of any simple declarative sentence. 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall'. That we continue reading with only slight pause, as the cadence insists we do, ensures the line is registered as a statement in opposition to the sense of strain, the barrier of solitude, that a wall creates. By the completion of the poem we are convinced that the neighbour who believes unquestioningly his saying, 'Good fences make good neighbours', is the 'old-stone savage armed' who 'moves in darkness as it seems to me (and us),/ Not of woods only and the shade of trees.' The speaker of 'Mending Wall' distances himself from this position. For him the repair of the wall is 'just another kind of outdoor game,/ One on a side. It comes to little more.'

And yet that phrase has the last word, 'Good fences make good neighbours.' There are enough clues in the text to suggest that it is not only the speaker's neighbour who accepts the aphorism. Even the seemingly unquestionable opening line harbours a small doubt in the word 'Something'. Since that 'something' is undefinable, there is a feeling that it may prove unreliable, or insufficient, under further scrutiny. It is also not the neighbour who instigates the rebuilding of the wall:

I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.

More than that, the very principle of boundary marking is embedded in the creation of the poem, and in its structure. If we look again at Frost's poetic credo, there is already an intimation of strain. The cadences are achieved by 'breaking the sounds of sense with all their irregularity of accent across the regular beat of the metre.' Breaking. Restating this in another essay, 'The Figure a Poem Makes', Frost writes, 'The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited metre are endless.' The use of words such as 'breaking' and 'struck' imply a linguistic violence that sounds more in keeping with 'an old-stone savage armed', 'Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top'. At the very least then, good fences can make for good poems: the shape of 'Mending Wall' is determined by its own boundaries. The flowing 'tune' is created from a linguistic tension embodied in the phrase 'struck across the rigidity of a limited metre'. The irregular 'sounds of sense' are carefully placed, set 'stone on a stone'. The vast majority of the iambic pentameter lines also end in some form of punctuation. Although these are not usually full stops, the proliferation of commas, semi-colons and colons causes the reader to pause repeatedly. This has the effect of giving each line the aural appearance of a self-contained unit. It is as if each line, each brick of the poem, has been laid down to form a linguistic wall. This is compounded when we see that 'Mending Wall' is written as a single slab of language, a gap-less boundary.

The speaker states that 'Before I built a wall I'd ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out'. By following these lines with a reiteration of 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall', the speaker diverts our attention from the obvious conclusion that, since he began the re-building of the wall, he must have answered these questions of himself. Furthermore, the answers he returned have justified the building. Both phrases, 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall' and 'Good fences make good neighbours', are repeated twice in the text, acting as balances to each other. The speaker's dismissal of his motives for repairing the wall only as a 'kind of outdoor game' is not entirely convincing now. The condemnation of the neighbour consumes the final eight lines, however, and although we are still left with a sense of the inevitability of larger metaphorical barriers between people, the speaker's complicity in this is dissipated. Nevertheless, the form of the poem, its own structure within poetic 'limits', carries the melancholy drift that such a revelation engenders.

The performance of 'Mending Wall' is the embodiment of a sense both of a need for boundaries, a desire for a kind of solitude; and a resistance to that same impulse. I have found that the mode of 'Mending Wall', the dramatic monologue, is itself representative of this duality. Written as a 'man talking to men', the form makes the pretence of dialogue, but is in a sense unwilling to fulfil that commitment, preferring the final company of its own solitude. But that is not the only manner in which a writer experiences solitude. Poetry relies on 'insight', but it is this insight, into oneself, into the world in which one lives, that can produce its own feelings of isolation. For the writer, 'looking close' can bring about a heightened awareness of separation. One obvious point

is that the poet uses language differently to those around him or her, even if the 'voice' of the poetry is a 'natural, speaking voice'. So it is through language that the poet expresses what is a pre-existent solitude, but it is the same use of language that can increase that sense of remoteness. Paradoxically, it is writing that relieves this solitude at the same time. In a most basic sense, the act of writing poetry is a symbol of its own solitude. Writing is a solitary exercise, and so the 'performance' of poetry is therefore always, in some way, an encounter with solitude. Or as Frost writes in 'The Constant Symbol', 'Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements.'

'The Death of the Hired Man' is a different order of performance to 'Mending Wall'. In 'The Death of the Hired Man', Silas, a roving elderly farm hand, returns to the home of his former employers. The wife, Mary, moved by pity, takes him in while her husband, Warren, is at market. The poem is a record of the conversation between husband and wife on Warren's return, discussing Silas, and ultimately presenting the reader with his death, since he dies during the course of the conversation. Giving an address entitled, 'What Became of New England?', Frost told his audience, 'When the meaning goes out of anything, as happens, forms crumble, formulae ...' Whereas in 'Mending Wall' the form of the poem enhances our understanding of it by undermining the speaker to some extent, in 'The Death of the Hired Man', form is employed in an attempt to shore up meaning in the face of death. The absence of life, and the threat of a loss of meaning for those left behind, is counteracted in some way by a clinging to what form, and hence meaning, remains. This is poetry that seeks to provide what Frost calls, in 'The Figure a Poem

Makes', 'a momentary stay against confusion.' At the same time, however, the poem strikes an ambiguous register toward this capacity in poetic form, recognising the inadequacy of any preparation for death, including the 'stay' of language.

'The Death of the Hired Man' begins, 'Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table'. This opening leaves us unsure whether the death foreseen by the title has occurred or not. We do not know yet what Mary is thinking about, but following as it does the pronouncement, 'The Death of the Hired Man', the contemplative solitude of the first line has a melancholy tone. This is achieved not only by the image of the lone woman sitting in a semi-darkened room staring at a flame, but also by the multiple alliteration on 'm', which gives the line the aural quality of a sigh. The lack of a sure sense of what to do or say when confronted by death, or its imminent prospect, is reflected in the silence of this initial line. As readers, we are included in this uncertainty by not knowing quite what is going on.

Death is, in many respects, a failure to 'perform'. While this has an obvious application for the one dead, the effect is also felt by those left living. There is a sense in which no preparation for death is ever adequate. Nor words. This is reflected in Mary's account to Warren of her finding of Silas. In this short speech the latter's condition is represented as much in the structure of Mary's language as it is by what she says.

'He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.

When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
 Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
 A miserable sight, and frightening, too -
 You needn't smile - I didn't recognise him -
 I wasn't looking for him - and he's changed.
 Wait till you see.'

We detect the hired man's exhaustion in Mary's saying, 'He's worn out.' Three words. There is an economy of expression that admits of only the most essential movement. Juxtaposed to 'He's worn out', 'He's asleep beside the stove' indicates through its longer sound that Silas may be getting some relief in sleep. The second sentence seems to slide out from the first as if a tension has been released, in the way one falls asleep. But the second sentence is not much longer than the first, suggesting that Silas' rest will be interrupted. Mary carries on with her account. 'When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,/ Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep'. In recalling what she saw, Mary is able to describe discovering the hired man in language that acquires some momentum. But this movement reflects her activity, her coming up from Rowe's and what she saw. Once she says that Silas was, 'A miserable sight, and frightening, too', her language begins to falter. This is due in part to a response from Warren, to which Mary replies, 'You needn't smile'; but the continuity of her language, like Silas, is 'broken', and her speech falls off into a series of short sentences interspersed with dashes. Forced to resort to a 'Wait till you see', Mary's language fails to describe the poverty of Silas' condition adequately. Nevertheless, Mary's speech does 'perform' here, in that the 'form' of her speech embodies her desolation in view of the impending death.

I have indicated the threat that death poses to 'meaning', but a sense is simultaneously built up in which everything that occurs around the time of death accrues additional meaning. This is because anything that happens then is judged by how it measures up to the death. One way in which this is represented in the language of 'The Death of the Hired Man' occurs in Warren's first discourse. Silas has proved an unreliable hired hand, and during the previous haying Warren had warned, 'If he left then, I said, that ended it.' Ignorant of the seriousness of Silas' condition, however, Warren is unaware of the prophetic nature of his words. But the reader already has a sense of foreboding, knowing from the title that a death is inevitable. Occasions of this kind are repeated throughout the poem: for example, later in their conversation, Mary says to Warren about Silas, 'Of course he's nothing to us, any more/ Than was the hound that came a stranger to us ...' The eye of the reader picks up at first only that ominous single line, 'Of course he's nothing to us, any more'. As it turns out, the hired man may already be dead when Mary says this.

Another accrual of meaning develops over the course of the conversation between husband and wife. Even though Warren is not entirely convinced of the severity of Silas' condition until the end of 'The Death of the Hired Man', the continued dialogue between Mary and him begins to serve the psychological end of establishing a memory of, and identity for, Silas that will be preserved in the event of his death. There is no single slab of text now though, as in 'Mending Wall'. The 'stays' here take longer to establish. They are smaller slabs, gravestone markers, of conversation. Although Frost has been criticised for his verbosity at times, particularly in his long narrative poems, here the multiple

speeches serve an important purpose. The title of the piece has already posted warning that it is an elegy. Consequently the long conversation becomes a species of reminiscing that is a preparation for Silas' death, and which forms, in the end, his eulogy. The words function as a 'stay against confusion' and the loss of meaning that death brings by giving a memory of Silas which will be used to fill the emptiness of his absence. Warren's praise for the way in which Silas could build a load of hay is important in this regard, and counters in some measure the memory of his unreliability.

'I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.'

This extract could also be read as a metaphor for the functioning of a well-structured poem. The loose iambic pentameter lines of 'The Death of the Hired Man' are in a sense 'tagged and numbered', and the rhythm is unstrained. In this work, 'you never see (Frost) standing on the hay/ He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.' We may extend the analogy and say that the form of 'The Death of the Hired Man' - the way language is employed to represent the desolation surrounding death, and attempts to prevent a loss of meaning - has a definite function in relation to the preparation for death, and to grief. However, there is also a tacit acknowledgement of its limitations: this recollection of

Silas' skill also serves as a reminder of how he is now 'straining'. If Silas can no longer 'perform', there is a suggestion that the poem may fall short too. Mary knows that the desire to teach his skill to a boy who had worked on the farm previously will not be fulfilled in Silas' state. The hired man's current inability to 'perform', even the 'one accomplishment' by which he may be partly redeemed in his own eyes ('He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be/ Some good perhaps to someone in the world.'), moves her to pity. She discloses that Silas 'has come home to die'. After further discussion, it seems as though Warren will allow Silas to stay. He goes to see the farm hand, but finds him dead.

The concluding lines of 'The Death of the Hired Man' attempt to provide some answer to a dilemma posed in another of Frost's poems, 'The Oven Bird'. There 'The question that (the bird) frames in all but words/ Is what to make of a diminished thing.' In 'The Death of the Hired Man',

Warren returned - too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

'Warren?' she questioned.

'Dead,' was all he answered.

This exchange, after the earlier lengthy dialogue, indicates the inability of language to equal the 'performance' of death. Amongst a handful of some of Frost's 'definitions', published in 1923, he writes, '(Words) must be flat and final like the show-down in poker, from which there is no appeal.' There is no appeal from death. Confronted by the

absolute finality of what he has seen, Warren's language contracts to the minimum single syllable that represents Silas' end: 'dead'. There is a sense in which all that Mary and Warren's talk has achieved has been nothing but the forestalling of their knowledge of Silas' death, that the 'stay' of language has been no more than a delaying of the inevitable. While this is true at its most literal level, it ignores the compensations that must be made by those left living to prepare for and accommodate death. There is a gentleness to the lines preceding Warren's announcement which is another kind of preparation for Silas' death. In addition to being a preparation for what Warren has to tell, however, the structure of the lines reflect the nature of the announcement. The abruptness of 'Warren returned - too soon, it seemed to her', achieved by the repetition of the staccato 't', reflects Mary's initial shock at what she knows is to come. The next line, though, begins gently with the soft 's' sounds of 'Slipped to her side' as Warren moves to comfort his wife. This gentleness mirrors Mary's actions in the opening stanza when

She took the market things from Warren's arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

The line begun by 'Slipped to her side' terminates on 'waited', with an end-stop. With the characters, the reader waits in the pause for the plaintive question, 'Warren?' There is no answer in language equal to 'Dead'. And yet it is the 'slabs' of conversation that have helped to build up a memory of Silas. Mary, Warren, and the reader have acquired an awareness of him that gives his death significance. His death becomes more than an anonymous passing into meaninglessness for those left behind. The 'performance' of the poem then is its attempt to, in Milosz'

formulation, provide a shelter for the human heart, without taking anything away from the finality and desolation of death. Since death is a 'formlessness', it seems appropriate that one means to counter that would be the preservation of what forms remain, to load the forms and people (another type of 'form') left with meaning. Where 'The Death of the Hired Man' succeeds well as a poem dealing with death, however, is its achievement of this and its simultaneous acknowledgement of the impossibility of the task of being equal to grief.

The third poem whose 'performance' I will look at is 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. This piece is deceptively simple: a man is travelling at night. He is captivated by the sight of woods filling up with snow. He stops to watch the spectacle for a time before continuing his journey, drawn on by the obligation of prior commitments he has made. In 'The Star-Splitter', the speaker and Brad McLaughlin, while spending the evening star-gazing, 'Said some of the best things we ever said.' In other words, it is a combination of visual and aural elements that result in the christening of the telescope as the Star-splitter. In 'Stopping by Woods', however, it is particularly true, as Frost writes in 'The Figure a Poem Makes', that 'The sound is the gold in the ore.' The trance-like rhythms move in the way the speaker of 'The Star-Splitter' describes the working of the telescope. They don't

... do a thing but split

A star in two or three the way you split

A globule of quicksilver in your hand

With one stroke of your finger in the middle.

The 'performance' of 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is the way in which the visual elements of the poem are brought into clarity by its rhythm, ensuring that an apparently easy meaning becomes as elusive as fluid mercury: you can't quite put your finger on it, but it moves around the finger and away from it.

The second stanza of 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' develops the sense of solitude that lurks in the early statement, 'His house is in the village though'. The spot where the traveller has interrupted his journey is 'without a farmhouse near'. The visual images of the lone figure with his horse in woods, near a 'frozen lake' on 'The darkest evening of the year' are near archetypal emblems for solitude, of the 'long dark night of the soul'. There is no sense of incipient fear, however. Rather, the impression is one of quiet, and the regular rhythm of falling snow. The awareness of solitude in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is achieved by this sense of quietness, as much as by the visual images with which it works in conjunction. The rhythm of near silence is established from the outset, in part through the iambic end-rhyming lines. For the first three stanzas the end rhymes of the four-lined verses are broken in the third line, but the end of this third line establishes the dominant end-rhyme for the next stanza. This technique saves the stanzas from sing-song, and also binds one stanza to the next aurally to create an awareness of the regularity of falling snow. Without being monotonous, the stanzas create the illusion in sound of layer upon layer of settling snow. We become aware of how subtly this has worked on us when we hear the horse give 'his harness bells a shake/ To ask if there is some mistake.' Hard, stressed syllables dominate the first of these two lines - 'gives his har(ness) bells a shake'. These

sounds intrude on the trance-like sense the poem has established, but the intrusion is short-lived. An image of falling snow itself is most closely embodied by the lines that follow, as if the speaker, after the interruption of the bells, makes an effort to focus more fully on the snow. 'The only other sound's the sweep/ Of easy wind and downy flake.' The two lines are held together in the alliteration of the 's', 'w' and 'd' consonants, and the assonance of sweep/ easy and sound/ downy. The 's' and 'w' sounds are soft, and capture the aural sense of the descending flakes combining with the light wind. The trance is broken by the thought, 'But I have promises to keep'. The stresses of this line interrupt the sweep of 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep'. The journey is re-established with the couplet, 'And miles to go before I sleep.'

The speaker is off again. And yet ... 'Whose woods these are I think I know.' The simple declarative sentence with which 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' begins has a ring of uncertainty to it. 'I think I know.' This phrase introduces an element of doubt into the poem which it never quite shakes. Since doubt is present in the first line, there is a sense that whatever is narrated from then on is questionable. The confident delivery of the second line, 'His house is in the village though', should not dissuade us. Even this line is not as sure of itself as it seems to be. What sounds like a simple declarative sentence is not one, the line ends with a semi-colon. This generalised sense of doubt continues when the speaker says, 'He will not see me stopping here/ To watch his woods fill up with snow.' There is almost a furtiveness to these lines, as if the speaker, in stopping 'to watch his woods fill up with snow', feels he is doing something vaguely wrong or embarrassing

that he would not like to be caught at, or have to explain. 'My little horse must think it queer', is a displaced admission that the speaker himself feels the strangeness of his actions. The doubtful tone is again repeated in, 'He gives his harness bells a shake/ To ask if there is some mistake.'

The rhythm of 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' ensures there is one certainty in the poem, however. Although the word 'woods' appears in each of the other stanzas, it does not appear in the third verse. What we have is, 'The only other sound's the sweep/ Of easy wind and downy flake.' It is as if the speaker's trance, represented by these two lines, is so absolute he has lost all sense of the woods and himself being separate entities. There is almost a fusion of identity between the watcher and what he watches. Beyond the beauty of the scene, the speaker's absorption with the woods filling with snow may represent a desire for transcendence or oblivion, or a state in which the two are not entirely separable. Although the trance is broken by 'But I have promises to keep', it is without the authority which the stressed syllables of that line suggest. The line does break the pattern of rhythm we hear in 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep', but this rhythm re-establishes itself in the repeated, 'And miles to go before I sleep.' Furthermore, this stanza is unique in that all four lines share the same end-rhyme. 'But I have promises to keep' does not stand in isolation structurally either. It is not a declarative sentence. It is separated from the other lines by commas only. In other words, 'But I have promises to keep' is completely contained within the form of the stanza. 'And miles to go before I sleep,/ And miles to go before I sleep' has a soporific quality produced by the alliteration of 's', and the

repetition of the words. There is a quality of tiredness in the lines that equals the rhythm of the horse resuming its trek which we also sense in these couplets. The 'performance' of 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' then, is its embodiment of the difficulty with which the decision to fulfil the obligations of his promises, rather than experience the transcendence of the snowy woods, is won by the speaker.

'But I have promises to keep': 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' introduces the issue of responsibility. The question of what constitutes a poem's 'performance' which I have posed in this essay, is just another way of asking what the poet's responsibility is toward each poem. Earlier I spoke of the connotations that the title 'The Star-Splitter' had for me, and said that it embodied, in some way, the 'first promise' of poetry. By this I mean an anticipation that reading or writing a word, and hopefully a whole poem, like that title brings. It is a recognition of the ability of words and poetic language to move. Poetry begins in rhythm, the movement toward language before words that is almost a kind of emotion. Then we select words to produce meaning that will move us. The order of the performance differs from poem to poem. 'Mending Wall', 'The Death of the Hired Man' and 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' each have different commitments that the poem has to fulfil in order to work well. Poetic responsibility is to ensure that the different requirements of each poem, in language, theme, rhythm are met in such a way that the poem holds these in a balance that is equal to that initial creative emotion which becomes the impulse to the rhythm and language of poetry. It is the balance that is performance. It is the performance that is the shelter for the heart.

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